

The *Institutio* as a Basel product

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The *Institutio* of 1536 was a product of the Basel printing industry and of the refugee culture of the city. Its printers, Thomas Platter and Balthasar Lasius, had formed a partnership in the early 1530s with Robert Winter, a nephew of Oporinus. Together they published a number of theological and humanist works. Platter, whose remarkable career from Valais goatherd to printer and schoolmaster was mentioned in Chapter II, was a convinced Protestant who used his press to spread the Reformed faith. The printing of a book by a French refugee, addressed to the King of France and defending the persecuted French Protestants, was a political act that required the tolerance of the Basel council.¹

The choice of Basel for the publication of the *Institutio* was not accidental. Basel was a centre of Protestant printing, with presses capable of producing Latin theological works of high quality and with access to the Frankfurt fair, where the book could be sold to readers throughout Europe. The city was also a place where French refugees could live and publish without fear of persecution. Calvin's book was aimed at a European audience, which Basel was the best place to reach.

The small format of the first edition, an octavo that could be carried and hidden, reflected its purpose. It was intended for readers who might need to conceal it, in France and other countries where Protestant books were prohibited. The smuggling of Protestant books from Basel, Strasbourg and later Geneva into France was a major enterprise of the Reformation, organised by printers, booksellers and colporteurs who took great risks. The networks of book smuggling, which crossed the borders of France with forbidden goods, anticipated in some respects the networks that later carried other forbidden or taxed goods across the same borders.

1 Notes

1. On the printing partnership of Thomas Platter, Balthasar Lasius and Robert Winter in Basel in the 1530s, see HLS, article "Platter, Thomas"; the literature on Basel printing. To be verified. ↩

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